

Original Paper

Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-translatology— —A Case Study of the Film *Flipped*

Minyu Zhao¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Xinyang Normal University, Xinyang, Henan, China

Received: July 2, 2025

Accepted: July 17, 2025

Online Published: August 5, 2025

doi:10.22158/elsr.v6n3p86

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v6n3p86>

Abstract

*In the context of increasing cross-cultural exchanges, films stand out as a prominent medium for cultural communication. Therefore, subtitle translation of films is a key link in breaking language barriers and realizing cultural transmission, whose importance is self-evident. Based on the innovative and systematic theoretical framework of eco-translatology, this paper conducts a specific analysis of the subtitle translation in the film *Flipped*. Combining the concept of “three-dimensional transformation” proposed by eco-translatology, it discusses the adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions respectively, reveals the application value and guiding significance of this theory in subtitle translation, provides useful references for film subtitle translation practice, and promotes the effective realization of cross-cultural film and television communication.*

Keywords

*Eco-translatology, three-dimensional transformation, *Flipped*, subtitle translation*

1. Introduction

In the current era of surging globalization, films, as a highly influential and communicative form of cultural art, have become an important bridge for cross-border cultural exchanges. *Flipped*, a classic work full of warmth and innocence, directed by Rob Reiner and adapted from Wendelin Van Draanen's novel of the same name, has won the love and praise of audiences worldwide with its fresh and natural style and profound emotional portrayal. Set in a rural area of the United States in the 1960s, the film revolves around two adolescents, Juli Baker and Bryce Loski. When Juli first saw Bryce in the second grade, she was attracted by his bright eyes and thus started a years-long innocent crush. Bryce, an introverted boy, was initially overwhelmed by Juli's enthusiasm and even tried to avoid her. Over time, a series of events prompted Bryce to re-examine his inner feelings: Juli's love for the sycamore tree, her brave fight when the tree was about to be cut down, which showed her persistence and uniqueness; her

wisdom and talent displayed at the science fair; and even her positive and optimistic attitude when her family was facing financial difficulties—all these made Bryce have a new understanding of her. In this process, Bryce began to realize the shining points in Juli that he had ignored, and his once avoidance and resistance gradually turned into an indescribable “flipped” feeling. The film adopts a unique narrative technique, alternating between Juli’s and Bryce’s perspectives. This narrative structure allows the audience to deeply understand the inner world and emotional changes of the hero and heroine, enhancing the layering and richness of the story and making the audience feel immersed in the plot. The original film is in English, so translation is indispensable for audiences in other countries. The quality of translation directly affects the depth of understanding, acceptance, and richness of cultural experience of the target language audience towards the source language film.

2. Characteristics of Subtitle Translation

2.1 Time and Space Constraints

Film screening is continuous, and subtitles are presented to the audience within limited screen space and a certain period of time. This requires subtitle translation to be concise and clear, avoiding lengthy and complex sentence structures and excessive modifiers. Therefore, in translation, it is necessary to retain the core information to ensure that the audience can quickly read and understand the subtitle content without affecting their viewing of the video images.

2.2 Colloquial Tendency

The lines in film and television works are mostly daily oral expressions, and subtitle translation should also follow this characteristic, using easy-to-understand language that is close to life. Colloquial expressions can make the audience feel natural and smooth when watching, as if they hear the characters communicating in their familiar language. Moreover, colloquial subtitle translation helps to enhance the personality and emotional expression of the characters, enabling the audience to better integrate into the plot.

2.3 Cultural Adaptability

Since film and television works often contain rich source language cultural elements, subtitle translation needs to consider the cultural background of the target language audience and appropriately explain culturally-loaded words or other expressions with cultural connotations. In addition, some Western humor or allusions may need to be replaced with similar humor or allusions in the target language culture or translated freely during translation, so as to ensure that cultural information is effectively transmitted to the target language audience and avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

3. Overview of Eco-translatology

The birth of eco-translatology is inspired by multiple factors. At the beginning of the 21st century, with the enhancement of global awareness of ecological environment, ecological concepts gradually penetrated into various disciplines. The translation field also began to think about how to introduce the

concepts of systematicness, balance, and adaptability of ecology into translation research to solve the limitations of traditional translation theories in dealing with complex translation phenomena. At the same time, the increasing frequency of cross-cultural exchanges has brought more challenges and opportunities to translation activities. People need a new theoretical framework to guide translators in handling the complex relationship between source language and target language, thus giving birth to eco-translatology. Professor Hu Gengshen from Tsinghua University founded eco-translatology in 2001. This theory covers two fields: ecology and translation studies. It is not only based on Darwin's theory of evolution but also integrates traditional Chinese ecological wisdom. Its three core concepts can be summarized as "translation as text transplantation", "translation as adaptation and selection", and "translation as ecological balance" (Hu & Wang, 2021), which basically cover the whole of "translated text", "translator", and "translation context" in translation research (Tao & Hu, 2016). Eco-translatology holds that "translation is an activity in which translators adapt to and select from the translation ecological environment" (Hu, 2004). The translation ecological environment refers to "the world presented by the original text, source language, and target language, that is, the interconnected and interactive whole of language, communication, culture, society, as well as authors, readers, commissioners, etc." (Hu, 2008). To create excellent translations, translators need to maintain the balance of the translation ecological environment. Professor Hu Gengshen further proposed the translation method of "three-dimensional transformation", namely the adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Through "three-dimensional transformation", the interchange of language forms between source language and target language, cultural exchange, and the realization of communicative intentions can be achieved (Zhu, 2017).

4. Three-Dimensional Transformation in *Flipped*

4.1 Linguistic Dimension

The adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic dimension refer to translators' adaptive selection and transformation of language forms in the translation process. This kind of adaptive selection and transformation in the linguistic dimension is carried out in different aspects and levels (Hu, 2011). For example, at the lexical level, the semantics, connotations, or cultural load of source language words may be significantly different from those of the target language; at the syntactic level, the sentence structures of source language and target language are often different.

Example 1:

ST: It didn't take long to realize this girl could not take a hint.

TT: 我很快发现这姑娘一点也不识趣。

In the film, the heroine Juli stubbornly wanted to help Bryce move things, even when Bryce's father advised her to go home to avoid worrying her mother. The original English uses a typical structure with "it" as the formal subject, aiming to balance the sentence structure and postpone the real subject "to realize this girl could not take a hint"—a common grammatical structure in English. However, in Chinese

expression habits, people prefer direct subject-verb-object structures. Therefore, the translation “我很快发现” accurately converts it into an expression in line with Chinese habits, allowing readers to understand the meaning of the sentence more naturally. At the lexical level, “take a hint” translated literally as “接受暗示” can convey the basic semantics but is rather plain and stiff. The expression “不识趣” in the translation is more vivid and vivid. The flexible translation of words and sentence structures realizes the transformation in the linguistic dimension.

Example 2:

ST: I was about to tell her to get lost when the weirdest thing happened.

TT: 我正想叫她滚开的时候，最囧的事情发生了。

The original word “weirdest” literally means “most strange, most odd” and is usually translated according to its literal meaning. However, considering the context of the film, which is not a horror story, it cannot be translated as “最诡异的”. The scene at that time was: Bryce was eager to get rid of Juli’s overwhelming “enthusiasm”, so he ran towards his home in a hurry, hoping to make Juli retreat by escaping quickly and shaking off her hand. But in this process, a dramatic scene happened—Bryce, in a fluster, accidentally held Juli’s hand. This unexpected situation was completely beyond his expectation, instantly putting him in an extremely awkward and embarrassed situation. Therefore, a simple literal translation of “weirdest” obviously cannot accurately convey the unique emotional atmosphere contained in this plot. The translator skillfully chose the Chinese character “囧” for translation. This character has a unique meaning and rich expressiveness in Chinese, which can vividly depict Bryce’s 不知所措 and extremely embarrassed feeling at that time, accurately capturing the subtle meaning that the source language intended to convey in this specific context.

Example 3:

ST: By the sixth grade, I’d learned to control myself.

TT: 到了六年级，我收敛了不少。

This sentence is Juli’s inner monologue. After four years of enthusiastic treatment, Bryce’s attitude towards her still seemed lukewarm. Moreover, as she grew older, Juli herself had grown up, so in the sixth grade, her mentality changed significantly. She decided to change her previous enthusiastic and unrestrained style of doing things and turn to a low-key manner. The literal translation of “learned to control myself” in the original text is “控制自我”, but a literal translation would confuse target language readers. The word “收敛” means to restrain indulgent words and deeds or physical and mental state, which can just echo Juli’s previous behavior of hugging Bryce and surrounding him with enthusiasm. Moreover, the translation has a certain colloquial feature, which is highly consistent with Juli’s identity as a child. Because she is not conducting a serious self-restraint, but adjusting her behavior in a more natural way in line with her age, which further deepens her image of being enthusiastic and cheerful.

4.2 Cultural Dimension

Language is the carrier of culture. Different cultures breed different languages, and different languages reflect different cultures. The adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension means that

translators pay attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations in the translation process (Hu, 2011), strive to explore and effectively convey the cultural information implied in the source language, and at the same time, translators should pay attention to the differences between bilingual cultures to avoid misreading of the original text.

Example 4:

ST: Mr. Loski was clean and smooth on the outside, but it seemed like there was something rotten buried just beneath the surface.

TT: 洛斯奇先生外表温文尔雅，但金玉其外败絮其中。

During the dinner between Bryce's and Juli's families, Bryce's father spoke rudely and offensively, and he was absent-minded while eating, so Juli had the above thought. The words "clean" and "smooth" in the Western cultural context, in addition to describing the state of external neatness and being smooth in dealing with people, also have positive and good implied meanings, suggesting that a person gives a comfortable and reliable impression in appearance. "Rotten" is a negative word used to indicate the decay inside things. In translation, the translator adopted a Chinese cultural idiom "金玉其外败絮其中", which first appeared in Liu Ji's *The Seller of Oranges*. It means having an appearance like gold and jade but being like broken cotton wool inside, used to metaphorize something that is gorgeous in appearance but bad in essence. This idiom reflects the profound insight into the relationship between the essence and appearance of things in Chinese culture. It successfully conveys the core cultural connotation of the original text and adapts the translation to the ecological environment of Chinese culture through the use of Chinese-specific cultural expressions, realizing the transformation in the cultural dimension.

Example 5:

ST: Some of us get dipped in flat, some in satin, some in gloss. But every once in a while you find someone who's iridescent. And when you do, nothing will ever compare.

TT: 有人住高楼，有人在深沟，有人光万丈，有人一身锈，世人万千种，浮云莫去求，斯人若彩虹，遇上方知有。

The original text uses words such as "flat" (plain), "satin" (smooth as satin, symbolizing magnificence), and "gloss" (luster, representing brilliance) to metaphorize human characteristics through the properties of substances. The magnificence and brilliance represented by "satin" and "gloss" may imply successful people or those in advantageous positions in society; while "flat" may symbolize ordinary people. The translation "有人住高楼，有人在深沟，有人光万丈，有人一身锈" vividly depicts the differences in life circumstances and social status between people with vivid images. "斯人若彩虹，遇上方知有" compares that unique person to a rainbow, echoing the word "iridescent" in the original text, full of poetry and romance. In Chinese culture, the rainbow has always been a symbol of beauty and auspiciousness, representing hope, happiness, and beautiful emotions. The translation skillfully combines Western cultural elements with traditional Chinese culture, realizing the accurate transmission and effective transformation of the original cultural connotation.

4.3 Communicative Dimension

The adaptive selection and transformation in the communicative dimension means that translators pay attention to the adaptive selection and transformation of bilingual communicative intentions in the translation process (Hu, 2011). This aspect focuses on the equivalence of the translation with the original text in terms of communicative intention, function, and effect. Because translation itself is a cross-cultural communication activity, translators need to fully consider the communicative context, pragmatic function, and the author's intention of the original text in the source language culture.

Example 6:

ST: Just you wait.

TT: 别急嘛。

In the opening plot of the film, Bryce's family drove slowly into the quiet town with longing and expectation for a new life. The whole family was very much looking forward to their new home. When the car just stopped and the door was not yet opened, Bryce's sister couldn't wait to ask her mother what color her room was, and the mother replied, "Just you wait." This English sentence is concise and direct, with a strong tone of command or warning. In the English context, this expression is often used to strongly demand the other party to wait, such as in the process of handling some urgent matters, a superior may say something similar to a subordinate, asking him not to be impatient and wait for further instructions; or it may be a threatening way to inform the other party of a certain situation, similar to warning an opponent not to act rashly in some competitive scenes. In translation, the translator fully considered factors such as the family atmosphere and character relationships, skillfully adopted the method of free translation, and used a soft form of imperative sentence, translating it into "别急嘛". Although it is only three characters, it expresses the harmonious atmosphere between mother and daughter, enabling the target language audience to better integrate into the family situation created by the film and realizing the transformation in the communicative dimension.

Example 7:

ST: I was a Basketboy.

TT: 我成了"午餐男孩".

The original meaning of "Basket" is a basket. A literal translation would be "篮子男孩", which would definitely confuse target language readers and even trigger some strange associations, making them completely unable to understand its true meaning in the film. The word "Basketboy" here needs to be understood in combination with the film plot: Mayfield Middle School, where Juli and Bryce study, holds a fundraising auction every year. The auction randomly selects 20 boys, who carry baskets with lunch and step on the stage, while the students off the stage bid for the boys on the stage—that is the origin of "午餐男孩" (lunch boy). When dealing with this word, the translator did not simply stick to its literal meaning but translated the meaning behind "basket" in combination with the plot, helping target language readers get similar feelings to source language readers and realizing the transformation in the communicative dimension.

Example 8:

ST: No, don't be ridiculous. Of course I'm gonna pay you.

TT: 不，别傻了，我怎么能白吃你的鸡蛋呢。

In this example, there is no word related to “eggs” in the original text, but the word “鸡蛋” (eggs) appears in the translation. This is because Juli's family raised chickens that laid too many eggs, which could not be eaten up, and just when the neighbors needed fresh eggs, Juli sold the eggs to Mrs. Stubblefield. In the subsequent plot, to avoid being in a dilemma, Juli made a strategy of not taking money so that she would not overthink before going to the school auction. But on her way to school, she happened to meet Mrs. Stubblefield, who insisted on giving Juli the money for the eggs. In this case, if the translator simply translated it literally as “我当然要付钱给你” (Of course I'm going to pay you), although there is no semantic error, it would seem abrupt to target language readers, who cannot understand why they suddenly need to pay and the ins and outs of this money. Therefore, in translation, the translator rendered it as “我怎么能白吃你的鸡蛋呢” (How could I eat your eggs for free), skillfully showing the cause and effect of the matter through translation, helping target language readers fully understand and realizing the communicative function.

5. Conclusion

Based on the “three-dimensional transformation” of eco-translatology, this paper analyzes the application value of eco-translatology by combining examples of subtitle translation in the film *Flipped*. In the linguistic dimension, it properly handles lexical and syntactic differences to make the translation conform to the habits of the target language; in the cultural dimension, it skillfully conveys cultural images and clarifies connotations; in the communicative dimension, it fully understands communicative contexts and intentions and exerts the function of communicative equivalence. In future research and practice of subtitle translation, we should continue to deepen the application of eco-translatology concepts, actively explore more translation paths and methods adapted to different types of films and multicultural contexts. We should make continuous efforts to further improve the quality and level of film subtitle translation, promote the beautiful vision of pluralistic coexistence and prosperous development of global film and television culture on the stage of cross-cultural communication, so that audiences from different cultural backgrounds can better understand and appreciate the cultural charm of all parts of the world through the art form of films, and promote the exchange and integration of human culture.

References

- Hu, G. S. (2004). *Translation as adaptation and selection*. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press.
- Hu, G. S. (2008). Understanding translation theories through terms——An overview of translation as adaptation and selection. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, 2, 1-5.
- Hu, G. S. (2011). Research focus and theoretical perspective of eco-translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 32(2), 8.

- Hu, G. S., & Wang, Y. (2021). Research paradigm of eco-translatology: Positioning, connotation and characteristics. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 42(6), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.16362/j.cnki.cn61-1023/h.2021.06.001>
- Tao, L. C., & Hu, G. S. (2016). Integrating Chinese and Western, survival of the fittest: The rise and internationalization of eco-translatology—An interview with Professor Hu Gengshen. *China Foreign Language*, 13(5), 92-97. <https://doi.org/10.13564/j.cnki.issn.1672-9382.2016.05.013>
- Zhu, J. Y. (2017). A study on subtitle translation of Chinese films “going global” from the perspective of eco-translatology—A case study of Mr. Six. *View on Publishing*, 21, 78-80+95. <https://doi.org/10.16491/j.cnki.cn45-1216/g2.2017.0700>